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January 17, 2003

TO: Each Supervisor

FROM: Thomas L. Garthwaite, M.D.  
Director and Chief Medical Officer

SUBJECT: **CHEMICAL TOILETS IN SKID ROW**

On January 7, 2003, the Board of Supervisors approved a motion by Supervisor Burke, requesting a report on chemical toilets in Skid Row. This is the response to that motion.

**BACKGROUND**

In 1991, the Department of Health Services Environmental Health (EH) unit was consulted about a proposal to install portable toilets in Skid Row. For the next several years, EH participated in meetings and provided comments on the proposal. Based on our files, it appears that the toilets were installed in 1994.

**STATUS OF CURRENT CONDITIONS**

Our greatest concern has always been to assure that these toilets are maintained regularly. It is our understanding that the City of Los Angeles contracts with Waste Management to service the toilets twice a day.

Since the installation of the toilets, the Department has received three complaints: one in December 1997, one in September 1999, and one in January 2000. The 1997 and 2000 complaints came from Ted Hayes, homeless advocate. He expressed concerns over the misuse and inherent health issues related to portable toilet use on a permanent basis for the homeless. Each complaint was investigated at the time.

Based on the Board's January 7 request, EH surveyed the toilets on January 13 and 14, 2003 to determine their condition. Nearby residents on the street acknowledged that the toilets are maintained at least daily. These residents indicated commented on the need for more toilets.

EH staff found that they were in reasonable condition, given their use. Most were easily accessible and the seats were clean. The major problem with the toilets surveyed was the lack of toilet paper. Only twelve were equipped with toilet paper and many had broken toilet paper dispensers. Three toilets were contaminated with feces (diarrhea). Most urinals were improperly used as trash receptacles. There were no uncharacteristic odors inconsistent with the use of portable toilets.

Clearly, some individuals use the toilets for other kinds of personal business. In seven instances, individuals who may not have been using the facility as intended did not allow inspectors access to inspect the toilet.

Another observation was the inaccurate recording of the service date inside each unit. Staff contacted Waste Management to remind their drivers to document each service.

EH staff will contact the City of Los Angeles to insure that the servicing issues are resolved with Waste Management.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please let me know.

TLG:js

c: Chief Administrative Officer  
County Counsel  
Executive Officer, Board of Supervisors